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Stimulating and enjoyable dramatic activities in the classroom can nurture children's natural sympathies with drama. Re-acting a portion of a second-rate television show can help children become more perceptive critics and prepare them to view better drama that the teacher could bring to the classroom. Free, creative rhythmic movement allows children to use their imaginations, while observation of the emotional and physical states of others gives them an understanding of people--the real basis for acting. Dramatizing a story is another enjoyable class activity that can lead to the students' desire to produce a play based on the story. For such productions, the children can solve the problems of setting, exposition, properties, and costumes. Using spontaneous dialog and the intimacy of floor-level presentations, students can give successful performances. (JS)

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Opinion

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Aspects of Junior School Drama — A Discursion

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It was with some diffidence that I agreed to write this article, since so much has been written and said by so many people better able and qualified to do so, than I. It is therefore a short account of some personal views and experience and is not offered as being more than that.

First, then, I do not wish to make possibly extravagant claims about the psychological benefits gained by children from activities in this field. That some gain satisfaction from opportunities in drama activities in self-expression and communication is true, but to me this is merely the possible incidental benefits to be had from work which should be essentially for the pure enjoyment of as many children as possible, and if this comes from some sense of satisfaction, so much the better.

True it does seem to be, though, that a large majority (but I think NOT all) children have some natural desire to perform — be it in leaping about or in more subdued mime, speech, or just in good or ill-natured mimicry.

The principle here, I think, is that these natural sympathies with drama should be fostered and nurtured in an atmosphere of fun, since in our schools is the material for the growth and improvement of the wide adult theatre, and, in a numerical sense more importantly, the audience source of the future. I believe that we shall have achieved much if only we can develop some understanding of and liking for the live theatre as enjoyable entertainment. Perhaps our children will grow up to be adults without the prejudices that dog the live theatre now — that all actors are "queer", (not just in the homosexual sense), that attending the theatre is a dull drag for husbands to be badgered into by their wives (perhaps for social acceptance reasons), that plays are so often so amateurish that the risk of boredom is too great, or that the live theatre is a haunt of people who go (or worse, pretend to go) for intellectual stimulus only. And perhaps the grounds (and it must be admitted that they do exist) for such prejudices will eventually disappear.

There are, of course, many books available suggesting lesson plans and exercises in the activities which may be part of a "Drama" programme — relaxation, movement and dance, group and individual mime, speech training, verse speaking, effective discussion, criticism, puppetry, story dramatization, episodes — amusing, serious or didactic — for acting, and scripted plays.

To suggest lesson plans and courses is not my purpose in this article. Rather, I wish to mention a few activities which I have found to be stimulating and enjoyable to both children and teacher.

First why NOT sometimes let children re-act something done in a possibly very second-rate television show? So often this is discouraged, and yet I have found it to be a valuable starting point for appreciative thinking, and some boys have discovered new delights in being able to bring greater understanding and criticism to their viewing. Being able to watch a programme together and discuss it can be fun, when boys show their "better" ways of doing things, suggest inconsistencies or attack the camera angles. Following from this, I should like to suggest that as schools and teachers we could do more to bring to our classes other and better fare than much of their television. If more discerning audiences are what we want in the future we can hardly expect them to develop if our children are not

exposed to anything but television and cheap cinema. All important inspiration can be gained from sources often neglected by schools, for example the Adelaide Children's Film Festival, and the puppet dance and children's theatre companies which occasionally come to Adelaide as well as ballet, folk and other theatre directed at adults. Some children can gain much inspiration and ambition and feeling for atmosphere from programmes not fully understood.

When I decided I would try some work in the area of essentially free creative rhythmic movement, I was ready to find that it would never capture the imagination of ten to twelve year old boys. Their response to work with a variety of percussion rhythmic patterns and to bold vigorous music was thrilling if not always very pleasing to the eye. I carefully avoided the term DANCE — but the boys soon began to use it without embarrassment. I am sure my insistence on the boys' wearing gym togs, and using bold, strong, exhausting movements helped in their first acceptance of this work, which seems to give a first class opportunity for free use of imagination (individually, or in pairs or small groups) in creating, and it is CREATING movements and visual patterns. Of course this can be developed with greater degrees of teacher direction to something akin to ballet, jazz ballet or "folkish" dancing.

Children are easily encouraged to observe features of the behaviour of people around them — the shifty-eyed, the lame, the hearty barracker, the policeman, the spruiker, the pained, the proud, the ogler, the gum-chewer, the excited, sad, angry, joyful. All these make a fine crowd or can be used individually.

In encouraging the observation of emotional and physical states and their portrayal in bodily movement with an attempt really to capture and feel a mental state, I am sure that as well as the development of an eye for detail there comes sometimes a sympathy with the world — an awareness that real feelings are behind everyman's facade.

This real basis for acting is often what children's acting seems to me to lack. They can easily adopt the stereotyped comic book and cheap television portrayal of character and feeling. Not that that has no place, but I have found ten and eleven year olds becoming sensibly critical of the motivation acting and production of shows they have seen, and enquiring into the achievement of visual and emotional realism in film — how the fights are done and the fallings and shootings and angry and other dramatic scenes.

I want to repeat here that sheer enjoyment is the best basis for understanding, appreciation and ability, and can lead, with luck, to a sense of satisfaction in understanding or perhaps communicating better with the world. This is to say that I am not suggesting that children should be expected to have adult sensitivity or awareness in acting or criticism more than in anything, but merely that they can work with meaningful good sense for their age and still find the process enjoyable. They do derive satisfaction in graduating from unthoughtful caricature acting and sweeping criticism which they nearly all start with, and can too easily finish with.

I believe that when acting achieves an element of creativity (perhaps rarely) that enjoyment is greatest, that acting can be a creative and not merely interpretive activity, that it is an art. Many will disagree with this view. But I do think there comes a creative moment when a player has moulded his being almost into a new bigger, different self. Perhaps that is extravagant.

The production of schools plays for juvenile or adult audiences is a much-discussed, often much-dreaded problem. I firmly believe that the

primary school at least is not the place for teacher directed "production of plays" with all that that phrase still means to most adults — placing children on a stage, with adult designed costumes, under adult devised lighting, with adult applied make-up and reciting (often badly) adult written lines. Even at secondary level most of us have seen the harrowing failure of plays where lines are parroted off in an almost meaningless atmosphere.

There is an alternative approach in which children's abilities can be more fully used, and in which they can be brought to solve for themselves more problems of the dialoguing, production, management and viewing of theatre entertainment than they normally do working under adult direction in a framework of adult theatre production.

Consider a short story — a simple legend, for example, or an episode from a book like "Tom Sawyer", used in the way one class used the story "A Jar of Olives" from a Wide Range Reader.

The story was read to the class. In discussion following, the characters and clearly defined sections were listed. Boys then mimed the action of these characters as the story was read again a few times, each effort more complex than the last.

In following sessions some of the class retold the story, and of course, assumptions and embellishments, not in the original, but enriching it imaginatively, appeared. Small groups then acted sections of the story using any movement or dialogue which came to mind.

Such story dramatization is commonplace, and indeed this is as far as both children and teacher will want to go with many stories. But sometimes, as in this case, a story captures the imagination of a class, and it will be all for "making a proper play".

Immediately the challenge was accepted the values of the task become apparent. First the playwright's problems were met, in that the author of the story had his characters moving into widely separated places and times. The boys soon saw the need to unify these diversities, to invent extra characters, if motivating dialogue was to be made and necessary background given to the audience without dry narration.

In actings-out and discussion, the information to be given in each scene by action and speech increased, diversified and became more or less standardized. Essential furnishings and props were agreed upon, as was a final cast and crews for offstage management, by popular vote.

After several sessions they wanted to be costumed and managed this with little help from mothers and none from me, including finding period and national pictures, which also gave suggestions for the scenery they insisted on having. It was wholly designed and executed by the "scene crew" on sheets of brown paper up to 7 ft. x 20 ft using poster colours, and finished up as two walls variously representing the inside and outside of houses and a background picture. All this was hung from parallel bars and jump stands in the gymnasium.

Still influenced by convention, the boys wanted to use the hall stage. This I refused (quite undemocratically) explaining that this would mean a remote audience unable to hear small boys' voices, artificial lighting and a general loss of contact. Even then some wanted to know what they would use for a curtain in the gym. Others already saw the ease and effectiveness of merely walking in and out of the acting area, from and into the audience or behind or beside the set.

At no time was any dialogue written down. The players knew the outline of development needed in each scene and improvised their action and speech. Thus each run-through was a little different and a spontaneity was kept alive which can die with learning script. The acting contained

much thought, feeling and mime which was the basis of dialogue and not superimposed upon it.

Performances for mothers and other classes were successful because, I feel certain, here was an effort almost wholly of the boys' making, which no-one judged by adult standards. The audience was saved the embarrassment of seeing something too difficult, too adult conceived, badly done.

I have not meant to suggest that there is no place for plays in which children learn scripts, develop a playwright's characterization, even use make-up and stage lighting, though I do enter a plea for STAGES to be left alone. The intimacy of floor level, preferably arena-type presentation, is something even secondary schools with a strong drama tradition could turn to. But scripted plays, I suggest, should come after children have had much experience trying to develop characters using their powers of observation and mime, and using lines and situations of their own making.

A good suggestion (again adoptable in senior school work, and indeed the adult theatre) is to tell children the story of a play, let them discover their own ideas of suitable characterization, how dialogue between various characters in various situations could develop, and THEN let them see a script, and see how the author did it. Their insight into the author's intentions will certainly benefit.

In this article, I have not wanted to declare that anything is, or is not, the case, but rather to share some personal views, and some pleasures gained from some practical experience. The field is immense. These are indeed merely some notes touching the surface, written in the hope that they will be of interest to others working, or particularly wanting to work in this field.

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